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Video Games as Feminist Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article argues that video games are powerful but overlooked tools for feminist pedagogy. I review two game-based teaching activities that I conducted with my Introduction to Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies course during my time as a teaching associate at Emory University. In the first activity, I opened a transgender studies unit with the independent games *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi*. In the second activity, I taught the feminist theory of intersectionality through *Halo*, a popular first-person shooter series. After reviewing the theoretical motivations for these activities as well as their results, I draw connections to existing education research and to Ian Bogost's (2007) concept of procedural rhetoric in order to account for the effectiveness of my game-based teaching activities. I proceed to make the case for video games as specifically feminist pedagogical tools with reference to the existing literature on feminist pedagogy (Crabtree, Sapp & Licona, 2009a; Fisher, 1981; Sandell, 1991; Shrewsbury, 1997), particularly bell hooks' classic *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). In the conclusion, I attempt to address fears that other feminist instructors might have about implementing game-based teaching activities in their classrooms.

Author Keywords

Pedagogy; feminist theory; intersectionality; transgender studies; procedural rhetoric; persuasive games

Introduction

As part of my doctoral work in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Emory University, I taught two sections of Introduction to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS). Most of the students who take this 100 level course are freshman and sophomores who have had no prior contact with feminist or queer literature; they simply want to fulfill a humanities requirement as they work toward majors in business and STEM fields. I face two central challenges in teaching students who have little to no prior investment in feminist and queer studies: they have had little exposure to gender and sexual minorities and they are not inclined to perceive the social world systemically. In brief: my students and I do not speak a common feminist language when they arrive in my classroom.

But my students and I do speak a common video game language; they are digital babies born in the 1990s and I blog regularly about games, gender, and sexuality. I realized that video games

are uniquely matched to the two challenges of teaching an introductory Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies course: games created by members of gender and sexual minorities could allow my students to understand experiences other than their own and, because video games are systemic, they could help my students perceive the operation of social systems. Following this realization, I quickly developed and implemented game-based teaching activities in my classroom. But what began as an experiment in game-based pedagogy quickly became a serious reflection on the effect that games had on my classroom as a feminist space. Video games not only helped my students understand feminist and queer concepts, they altered the dynamics of my classroom in a distinctly feminist way.

Video games are indeed overlooked but powerful tools for feminist pedagogy. Implementing game-based teaching activities in the classroom subverts traditional notions of professorial authority and encourages active student engagement. Game-based activities also require a respatialization of the classroom that fosters a sense of community. More video games than ever are directly relevant to the proceedings of a feminist classroom; an emerging feminist, queer and independent games scene is quickly producing games that thematically align with topics on Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies syllabi (Keogh, 2013). And, because video games highlight the interactivity of systems, they can help students develop the critical thinking skills necessary to understand the operation of systems of oppression. Put simply: video games belong in feminist classrooms.

During my time as a teaching associate, I conducted two game-based teaching activities in my class. In the first activity, my students played three independent games made by transgender women (*dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi*) at the start of our transgender studies unit. For the second activity, my students played the first-person shooter series *Halo* in order to better understand the feminist theory of intersectionality. These were successful, memorable class sessions and I intend to repeat them in my next section of WGSS 100.

In this article, I will review my teaching activities before making the case for video games as a form of feminist pedagogy. In the first section of this article, I share my activities with the hope that they will be replicated, altered, and built upon in future feminist classrooms. For each activity, I provide a brief description of the games I used, review the theoretical rationale for the activity and highlight my students' responses. By demonstrating the connections that I have made between feminist theory and video games, I hope to encourage other feminist instructors to coin new pairings of theories and games for their own use.

In the second section, I argue that video games can function as uniquely feminist pedagogical tools, with special reference to bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). It is intended for a wide audience including instructors in Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, feminist instructors across the social sciences, and games studies scholars. In order to supplement games studies scholarship on the pedagogical use of games—particularly Ian Bogost's (2007; 2008) concept of procedural rhetoric—I will draw from my own experiences with game-based pedagogy to argue that video games can bring classrooms into alignment with feminist pedagogical principles. In the conclusion, I will address fears that other feminist instructors might have about game-based pedagogy.

Activity #1: *dys4ia*, *Lim*, *Mainichi* and transgender studies

The Games

At the start of our unit on transgender studies, I took my nineteen students¹ to the Emory Center for Interactive Teaching to play Anna Anthropy's *dys4ia* (2012), Merritt Kopas' *Lim* (2012) and Mattie Brice's *Mainichi* (2012). All three are free, independent games made by transgender women. *dys4ia* and *Lim* are playable within any modern web browser; *Mainichi* is a downloadable title.

dys4ia is "an autobiographical game about [Anna Anthropy's] experience with hormone replacement therapy" (Anthropy, 2012). The player moves through a series of brief scenarios with simple interactive hooks. In one scenario, for example, the player attempts to move a strangely-shaped block through an ill-fitting hole as text reveals Anthropy's thoughts: "I feel weird about my body." As a whole, the game narrates Anthropy's experience seeking out and undergoing hormone replacement therapy as part of her gender transition. Memorable scenarios include: feeling uncomfortable in the women's washroom, shaving some embarrassingly persistent chest hair and lowering Anthropy's blood pressure so that she can begin taking estrogen.

Merritt Kopas' *Lim* has been described by Anna Anthropy as "a game about passing and violence" (McBee, 2012). Using the arrow keys, the player controls a small brown block and attempts to navigate a crowded maze. By holding down the "z" key, the player can cause their block to "blend in" with the other blocks in the maze and pass by them undetected. If the player does not blend in, the other blocks ram the player's block violently and repeatedly. The "blend in" button reduces the aggression of the other blocks but does not eliminate it altogether; in fact, if the button is held for too long, the screen begins to zoom and shake, disorienting the player.

While *Lim* leaves substantial room for interpretation, it is generally seen as a metaphor for the emotional and physical tolls of "passing," an experience familiar to members of many marginalized groups. For transgender people, "passing" refers to being able to move through social interactions without one's transgender status being known (see, e.g., Bornstein, 1994; Cromwell, 1999; Feinberg, 1992; Garfinkel, 1967; Halberstam, 1998; Prosser, 1998; Stone, 1992). While *Lim* seems to be informed by Kopas' own experiences with passing, the experience of "not quite fitting into one category" is, as she notes, not "limited to genderqueer people" and, as such, the game is still valuable for "people who will never experience those things" (Kopas, 2013).

Mainichi by Mattie Brice is a role-playing game that simulates the everyday experience of being transgender. Indeed, the title of the game means "everyday" in Japanese. The game is divided into three sections. In the first, the player controls Brice as she prepares to leave the house to get coffee with a friend. The player can choose whether Brice spends time taking care of her physical appearance (by taking a shower, doing her makeup or changing her clothes) or simply relaxing (by playing video games, taking a nap, eating, etc.) In the second section, the player controls Brice as she walks down the street to the coffee shop. While she walks, various non-player characters (NPCs) accost her. In the third and final section, Brice arrives at the coffee

shop and engages in brief conversations with a friend, a cashier, and a barista. The player's choices in the first section of the game determine how NPCs react to Brice in the second and third sections. If the player spends more time tending to Brice's physical appearance, she is misgendered less frequently but sexually harassed more often. If the player spends too much time relaxing, Mattie is misgendered and harassed throughout the game.

Theoretical Rationale

By requiring my students to play *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi*, I wanted to teach them about the difficulties faced by women (particularly transgender women) as they move through public space. When they transition, transgender women experience a simultaneous loss of male and cisgender privilege that has a palpable effect on their ability to move through public and engage in social interactions. *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi* reflect this experience by placing severe movement constraints and spatial restrictions on the player's range of motion. *dys4ia*, for example, turns the simple act of using the washroom into a treacherous game of stealth. In *Lim*, violent boxes pen the player's block in on all sides in the already narrow corridors of the maze. And, in *Mainichi*, the streets are rife with NPCs who hinder the player's progress. I wanted my students to feel frustrated and angry as they experienced these simulations of transgender experience.

Because *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi* simulate a restriction of movement and a constriction of space, they can also provide students with an accessible entry point for theoretical discussions of feminist phenomenology. In her classic 1980 essay, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young ruminates on the different ways in which men and women in the United States comport their bodies, move through space and relate to objects in their immediate vicinity. Young (1980) resists reading these differences as evidence of a "feminine essence" and instead produces a Beauvoirian reading of feminine movement as a product of "the historical, cultural, social, and economic Limits of [woman's] situation" (p. 29). Susan Bordo (1993) has performed a similar reading of hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia, arguing that "conventional constructions of femininity" (p. 174-175) are literally inscribed on the body in these particularly "female disorder[s]" (p. 168). For example, Bordo reads agoraphobia (the fear of open spaces) as a "virtual, though tragic, parody of twentieth-century constructions of femininity" in post-war America when white women were expected to remain in claustral, domestic spaces (p. 170). For Bordo, the body literally enacts social constructions of gender. Feminist theory, then, has long understood the body as a text, reading phenomenological differences in women's experiences of space as socially constructed rather than biological.

What are these differences? For Iris Marion Young (1980), women in the United States fail "to make full use of the body's spatial and lateral possibilities" unlike men who are able to move freely with long strides and swinging arms (p. 32). Women generally attempt to occupy less space than do men: they keep their arms closer to their bodies and walk with tighter steps (p. 32). Young further observes that, for women in sports especially, "a space surrounds [us] in imagination which we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted space" (p. 34). The space around a man's body is a space of possibility; the space around a woman's body is one of restraint.

Gendered differences in motion also affect women's engagement with the world around them. In contrast with men who are able to interact with objects confidently and with clear intentionality, women "often approach a physical engagement with things with timidity, uncertainty, and hesitance" (Young, 1980, p. 34). Men experience their bodies as instruments through which they engage with the world but women are made acutely aware of the space that their bodies occupy. As Young notes, "feminine existence experiences itself as *positioned in space*" (p. 41, italics in original), firmly fixated in place.

dys4ia, *Lim*, and *Mainichi* are uniquely equipped to elucidate the emotional effects that this phenomenological difference can have on women. Indeed, these gendered differences in motion amount to more than mere styles or aesthetics; they have palpable psychological consequences as well. In Young's view, constrained movement and fixed spatialization give rise to a "feeling of incapacity, frustration, and self-consciousness" (p. 34). Anna Anthropy has notably (and humorously) said, "I can't think of a form better suited to conveying frustration than the video game" (McBee, 2012). *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi* all frustrate the player by circumscribing the player's range of motion and making the player painfully aware of their spatial positioning. The men in *Mainichi* who harass Mattie Brice scurry across the screen with terrifying suddenness, as do the enemy blocks in *Lim*. By contrast, Brice in *Mainichi* and the player's block in *Lim* move slowly, steadily, and hesitantly. *dys4ia* forces the player to feel firmly "*positioned in space*" by requiring the player to move along a fixed track in claustral environments. And in all three games, the player cannot "make full use" of all "spatial and lateral possibilities" (Young 1980, p. 32). The basic mechanics of movement in *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi* intersect seamlessly with Young's feminist phenomenological account of bodily movement.

By contrast, consider that some of the most successful mainstream video games are "open world" games which afford the player ultimate freedom of movement. The *Grand Theft Auto* series and the *Elder Scrolls* games encourage the player to traverse vast environments with the utmost ease. When Todd Howard of Bethesda Games previewed the *Elder Scrolls* game *Skyrim*, for example, he promised that the player would be able to traverse every square inch of the massive game world. Internet memes quickly paraphrased his promise in this way: "You see that mountain? You can climb it." Howard's breathless promise perfectly encapsulates the way in which men experience their bodies as a straightforward "medium for the enactment of [their] aims" (Young, 1980, p. 34). In this way, the "open world" genre of video games provides a salient counterpoint to *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi* because they allow for freeform styles of movement that are more socially available to men than they are to women.

The Activity

For the duration of a fifty-minute class period, I allowed my students to play (and replay) *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi*. While they played the games, I circulated the room, helping students figure out how to play and answering their questions. At the close of the class period, I assigned my students to write blog posts about their experiences with the three games.²

The Results

If I was hoping to frustrate my students by requiring them to play *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi*, then I succeeded. While my students found the games to be "informative," they were also emotionally

affected by the experience of playing them in ways that dovetailed nicely with our discussion of Young's theory of feminine bodily comportment.

For example Fiona³ described *Lim* as “one of the most annoying games” she has ever played. Catherine reported that *Lim* was “super stressful” and “caused [her] to grind [her teeth]” while Corey was “scared” by the sudden attack of the aggressive squares. Commenting on the class's frustration as a whole, Alex recalled that the room was “filled with exasperated sighs and cries” when several people were playing *Lim* simultaneously but also noted that this “din in the room ... seemed to verbalize what is usually a secret, inner dialogue” for transgender people. *Lim* effectively demonstrated Young's point that gendered constraints on physical movement can take a palpable emotional toll on those who experience them, even in simulated form.

Judging from my students' blog posts, *Mainichi* and *dys4ia* were fertile ground for player identification with Mattie Brice and Anna Anthropy. The interactivity of the games seemed to blur the line between sympathy and empathy, allowing my students to experience some semblance of another person's struggle (cf. Kaufman & Libby, 2012; also see further discussion below). For example, Megan reported that she identified closely with Anthropy when playing *dys4ia*: “I felt that I was really in the woman's shoes while playing through the game.” Rachel realized that being able to “decide things for the character” in *Mainichi* helped her “build a connection” to Mattie Brice. And Laura expounded on this phenomenon in a moving blog post: “I think the fact that *I* was the person who was being slandered for being transgender was very striking. I can feel bad for someone all day long, but to feel it in my own flesh was heartbreaking.”

It was clear from other students' responses that this identification centered specifically on the motion and spatialization of the avatars. John wrote that *Mainichi* “gave you a sense of how even just going down the street ... can be a difficult experience.” And Sarah observed that the game “made [her] think how I would feel if people were whispering around me.” As my students played through *dys4ia* and *Mainichi*, they were also thinking about the difficulties of moving down a street as a transgender woman and the intense, paranoid feeling of being surrounded by an array of ominous others in a tightly constricted space. My students were able to experience Young's theory of feminine bodily comportment firsthand, tacitly reaching the same conclusions as Young through their own experiences with *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi*.

Activity #2: *Halo* and intersectionality

The Games

Later in the semester, my students played *Halo: Reach* and *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary* as part of another game-based teaching activity. Both of these games are multi-million selling first-person shooters, originally developed by Bungie and published by Microsoft Game Studios. Unlike *dys4ia*, *Mainichi* and *Lim*, which can be played for free on virtually any computer with an Internet connection, all *Halo* games must be played on Microsoft video game consoles (XBox, XBox 360). In *Halo*, the player controls a supercharged space marine named Master Chief as he battles hostile alien forces in order to protect humanity.

Theoretical Rationale

The fundamental tenet of the feminist theory of “intersectionality” is that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (Combahee River Collective, 1982, p. 13). As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) observes in her classic essay “Mapping the Margins”, systems of oppression “interact” with each other and “overlap” (p. 1265); they do not operate independently of one another. For example, sexism and racism do not simply run in parallel, affecting separate and compartmentalized aspects of people’s lives; rather, people who inhabit particular intersections of marginalized identity such as black women, experience forms of oppression specific to their social position as black women. In the foundational text on intersectionality, Crenshaw primarily focuses on “the interaction of racism and patriarchy” (p. 1265) but she notes that intersectionality can “provide the means for dealing with other marginalizations as well” (p. 1299). Since 1991, feminists have expanded theories of intersectionality to include a more comprehensive list of social identities such as race, class, ability, assigned sex, gender identity and sexual identity. While feminist scholars have long debated the usefulness of intersectionality as a critical concept (see, e.g., McCall, 2005; Puar, 2011), it remains a foundational feminist tool for resisting a narrow focus on either, say, exclusively gender or exclusively race.

How can video games teach students about intersectional oppression? In his blog post “Straight White Male: The Lowest Difficulty Setting There Is,” science fiction author John Scalzi (2012) suggests that video game difficulty settings provide an apt metaphor for forms of social privilege. If you are a straight white man, “the game is easier to play, automatically, and when you need help, by default it’s easier to get.” By contrast, the player who plays on the “gay minority female” setting has to be “hardcore” to succeed. Scalzi observes that in video games, as in life, it is still possible to “lose” when playing on an easy setting and still possible to win when playing on a difficult setting, but the default behavior of the world is drastically different on each setting.

While Scalzi hints at the way in which his metaphor might be able to encompass other facets of identity besides race, gender identity and sexual identity, it remains unable to account for the ways in which racism, homophobia, transphobia and classism interact with each other as systems of oppression. Difficulty settings in most games tend to be arranged on a bipolar line with predictable, quantifiable changes made to the gameplay as the difficulty increases. Our social identities, by contrast, are intersectional and multidimensional; we cannot simply arrange them on a line from “most oppressed” to “least oppressed.” Scalzi’s metaphor, then, opens the path for using video games to teach about oppression but perhaps not intersectional oppression. To do so requires a more complex metaphor that can capture the way in which systems of oppression interlock and compound each other’s effects.

Fortunately, video games are well-equipped to explore the interactivity of systems. In a conversation about the expressive capacity of video games, Ian Bogost has recently suggested that “games actually *might indeed* be the best medium for expressing certain things—say, the operation and experience of systems” (Bogost, 2013, italics in original). And Bogost’s (2008) concept of procedural rhetoric explains that video games can enable us to “critique the systems we live in” (p. 136). Because video games are fundamentally systemic, then, they are perfectly suited to critiquing interlocking and systemic forms of oppression. Teaching about intersectional oppression through video games, however, requires a certain kind of game with a certain type of

procedural rhetoric: a game in which the interactivity (intersectionality) of its systems can be experienced through the lens of the game's difficulty (oppression) settings. While many video games simply scale the overall difficulty on a slider from easy to hard and, as such, do not fit this description, there are a handful of video games in which the player can change the difficulty by changing the behavior of individual game systems.

Entries in the popular science-fiction series *Halo*, for example, have a much more complex difficulty system than the games that Scalzi refers to in his blog post. In addition to a generic slider from easy (Casual) to extremely difficult (Legendary) that affects basic game parameters, the *Halo* games—since *Halo 2*—have implemented a complex system of difficulty modifiers known as “skulls” that alter individual facets of the gameplay experience. Each skull targets a particular game system. For example, activating one skull halves the player's ammo while activating another removes the player's on-screen radar. Other skulls change the behavior of the enemies, increasing their health, aggressiveness, and dodging capability. On the difficulty selection screen, *Halo* players can choose which set of skulls they would like to activate, allowing them to craft specific, idiosyncratic challenges. Turning the difficulty up and activating all of the skulls will render the game nearly impossible while turning the difficulty down and only activating beneficial skulls will essentially make the game play itself. But between these two poles, the skull system supports a wide gradient of recombinable challenges that are not just *quantitatively* different but *qualitatively* different as well.

Activating multiple skulls in a *Halo* game effectively models intersectional forms of oppression. The individual effects of each skull do not simply run in parallel; rather, they intersect, overlap and interlock, just like systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1982; Crenshaw, 1991). For example, the Cowbell skull increases the explosion radius of all grenades and the Catch skull causes enemies to throw more grenades than they would under normal conditions. Activating both Cowbell and Catch means that the increased grenade output of the enemies is even more lethal than it would be if just Catch were activated. Activating three skulls simultaneously can produce even more complex effects. If Cloud (player's radar is turned off), Black Eye (player must melee an enemy to recover shields) and Mythic (enemy health is increased) are all turned on simultaneously, then the player—without any shields and severely lacking in situational awareness—must get close enough to engage in hand-to-hand combat with already supercharged enemies. The most extreme challenge available in a *Halo* game is completing a mission on Legendary with all skulls on (LASO, for short) and simultaneously coping with all of their compounding consequences. Because these skulls interact with each other in complex, overlapping ways, the *Halo* series is an optimal tool for helping students understand intersectionality.

The Activity

To prepare my students for our class activity, I required that they read John Scalzi's blog post (Scalzi, 2012), a blog post in which I outline the *Halo* metaphor (Allen, 2013), and some basic readings on intersectionality and privilege (Crenshaw, 1991; McIntosh 1990). I opened the class by asking for a volunteer (the self-professed best *Halo* player in the room) to play the iconic beach landing sequence in *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary* (*Halo: CEA*) on casual difficulty with no skulls activated. My volunteer, Jeremy, cleared the beach handily. I then ratcheted the difficulty up to “Legendary” and activated all of the skulls (LASO). I explained to the class how

each skull would discretely affect Jeremy's gameplay experience and then explained how each skull would interact with the other skulls that I had activated. I restarted the beach landing sequence and Jeremy failed spectacularly within thirty seconds.

With this strong point made, I broke the nineteen students up into six small groups and assigned each group to work through various Internet resources on forms of oppression centering on race, class, ability, assigned sex, gender identity and sexual identity (one category per group). I asked the students to discuss forms of oppression that seem to pertain *only* to the axis of identity under discussion in their group; in other words, I asked them to intentionally perform non-intersectional thinking.

While these discussions were taking place, students could break off from their discussion groups to visit what I dubbed "the *Halo* station," which consisted of two Xbox 360s hooked up to two side-by-side monitors, one loaded with *Halo: Reach* set to Casual difficulty with no skulls on, the other loaded with *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary* on LASO.⁴ While I oversaw the discussion groups, my colleague Christopher Sawula rotated students in and out of the *Halo* station, helping inexperienced students to familiarize themselves with the controls.

At the halfway mark of the fifty-minute class period, I recombined all six of the discussion groups into two large circles, ensuring that at least one student from each category-specific group had a seat at each circle. In other words, each large group had a student from the race, class, ability, assigned sex, gender identity and sexual identity sub-groups. I called these large discussion groups "intersectional think tanks." With these think tanks in place, I asked my students to discuss the ways in which the forms of oppression that they had discussed in their sub-groups might intersect and overlap with the forms of oppression that others had discussed. In effect, I was asking them to "join forces" and start thinking intersectionally. Christopher continued to manage the *Halo* station until the end of the class. As with the previous activity, I asked my students to write a blog post about their experience with the activity.

The Results

The *Halo* station's purpose was to function as an engaging, interactive metaphor to help the students think about privilege, oppression and intersectionality. I wanted the casual *Halo: Reach* players to experience the seductive joy of triumphantly moving through space as obstacles practically eliminated themselves and I wanted the LASO *Halo: CEA* players to tacitly feel the compounding effects of intersecting forms of oppression. Judging from Christopher's report of his time at the *Halo* station, students on casual and students on LASO did indeed have divergent experiences with the two games. For example, when playing *Halo: Reach* on casual, Corey simply said, "I'm bored."⁵ Meanwhile, students playing *Halo: CEA* on LASO grew increasingly frustrated with the experience. In a moment of rage, one student almost threw the controller to the ground. While even inexperienced players could play *Halo* on casual, even the most experienced *Halo* players could not make meaningful progress on LASO. As one reluctant group of students approached the LASO setup, Michael cautioned them, "It doesn't matter how good you are." I drew attention to Michael's comment in order to highlight the ways in which forms of oppression often override any merit or skill that the player/person might possess.

The *Halo* station also provided my students with a touchstone for thinking through difficulties that many of them had not yet faced. Sarah wrote that playing *Halo* “reminded [her] of the existence of numerous types of oppressions and how they interconnect” and Megan reported that the activity “really made [her] step back and think about all of the things [she] take[s] for granted every day.” John used the activity as an opportunity to think about his own positionality:

“As an upper middle-class white person, there are so many forms of oppression, which I may be aware of, but I have not really experienced myself. I felt the video game test [was] a really good metaphor for how some people’s lives are much easier or more difficult ... on a daily basis. People who come from an ‘easy setting’ like an upper class straight white person, have little obstacles in their daily lives and are able to easily and smoothly go about their day-to-day activities. Those who are on a ‘difficult setting’ face so many obstacles like racism all the time.”

While bringing *Halo* to a classroom was, admittedly, a flashy way to capture my students’ attention, it also proved to be a useful thought experiment as my students developed an initial understanding of intersectionality. The activity helped them to think reflexively about the complexity of their own privilege.

The “intersectional think tanks” also functioned smoothly in conjunction with the *Halo* station. In their discussions, both think tanks honed in on the intersection of ability and class, noting that working-class people with disabilities may be unable to afford the assistive devices and medical care they require. One group realized that a gay, lesbian or bisexual person of color could be fired based on their sexual orientation and then have a more difficult time regaining employment because of their race. In class, I compared this to the function of the Black Eye skull in *Halo* which, as noted earlier, requires the player to melee an enemy in order to recharge their shields. With this skull activated, the player is faced with an incredibly difficult challenge at a vulnerable moment. As they talked, I watched the students push past strict, identitarian divisions and realize that forms of oppression are multiple and overlapping, all within the confines of a fifty-minute class.

Video Games in the Feminist Classroom

Feminist Pedagogy

Existing literatures in both education research and games studies can account for the seeming effectiveness of my game-based teaching activities. Education researchers emphasize the need for experiential and participatory learning in which students form personal connections with the subject matter (Chapman, McPhee & Proudman, 1995; Joplin, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991). As Laura Joplin (1995) argues, unless students “significantly identify with, seriously interact with, [and] form a personal relationship” with the subject matter, then learning has not taken place. As my first game-based teaching activity demonstrates, titles like *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi* can help students form personal relationships with feminist subject matter. In particular, these games allowed my students to temporarily inhabit the mindset of a transgender woman. Recall that Megan noted that she felt as if she were “in the woman’s shoes” when playing *dys4ia* and that Laura felt as if she herself were “the person who was being slandered for being transgender.”

Geoff Kaufman and Lisa Libby (2012) refer to this phenomenon as “experience-taking,” or the act of “simulating the mindset and persona of a protagonist” and thereby “adopting the character’s thoughts, emotions, goals, traits, and actions” (p. 2). Experience-taking can help students to reshape their beliefs about “member[s] of a stigmatized group” (p. 15). Video games provide an ideal platform for “experience-taking”: the player’s actions are typically the protagonist’s actions, the player’s goals are the protagonist’s goals, and the player’s frustration coincides with the protagonist’s pain. *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi* allowed my students to understand, in part, the experience of being transgender because these games allowed them to simulate the “mindset and persona” of Anthropy, Kopas and Brice.

dys4ia, *Lim* and *Mainichi* are part of an emerging body of feminist and queer games that are thematically relevant for feminist classrooms; however, other scholars working at the intersection of games and education note that the pedagogical value of games cannot be circumscribed by their subject matter. James Paul Gee (2007) famously argues that video games, “yes, even violent video games” (p. 1) can be used to teach critical thinking skills. Steinkuehler and Duncan (2008) contend that *World of Warcraft*, a popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) can provide a player with “informal science literacy” (p. 540). And, in addition to arguing that designers can make video games with the express purpose of delivering a social message, Ian Bogost (2008) also notes that “we can learn to read games as deliberate expressions of particular perspectives” (p. 119). As a case in point, my activity with *Halo* reads a militaristic science-fiction shooter—a description that does not exactly scream “feminism!”—as an argument about intersectional oppression; in the context of my classroom, it is *Halo*’s systems and not its subject matter that accomplish the persuasive work.

Ian Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric (2008) can account for the effectiveness of my *Halo* teaching exercise. Procedural rhetoric is defined as “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word” (p. ix).⁶ Procedural rhetoric is not necessarily dependent on the “content of videogames” (p. ix); rather, in procedural rhetoric, it is primarily the systems of a video game that persuade the player. *Lim* is a classic example of procedural rhetoric at work: it is a sparse, abstract game which conveys a powerful message to the player through its systems alone. There is no text to tell the player what the game is about; the motion of the blocks *is* the argument of the game. Because video game systems can persuade the player, a video game about a space marine can help a student understand what it might be like to be a lesbian provided that the game can be read to explore systemic features of lesbian existence (cf. Harper, 2011, 400). In my *Halo* activity, students are able to understand marginalized experience through the multi-faceted difficulty system of the game rather than through its representational content.

Bogost is clear that procedural rhetoric can function as a strong basis for pedagogical projects. Because video game systems argue, “teachers can learn to help students address real-world issues by playing and critiquing the video games they play” (Bogost, 2008, pp. 120). Rather than persuading my students through a lecture—with the “spoken word”—I can allow them to experience a game-*cum*-argument which they can then “understand, evaluate and deliberate” on their own (pp. 120). Procedural rhetoric is especially relevant for feminist classrooms. Because games are “models of real and imagined systems” that can help students to “critique the systems we live in” (p. 136), video games are ideal companions for feminist theories of patriarchy,

oppression, racism and intersectionality, all of which require a systemic understanding of the social world.

Adding both to the literature on “experiential learning” and to Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric, I propose that video games can also function as particularly feminist pedagogical tools. This is the second layer of a two-layered approach: the above literature addresses how games can deliver feminist messages whereas what follows below is an explanation of why the act of using games can bring classroom dynamics into alignment with classic principles of feminist pedagogy. In this way, video games function as ideal feminist pedagogical tools, simultaneously delivering powerful arguments about social systems while also transforming classrooms into feminist classrooms. As my experiences in my Introduction to Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies class has shown, game-based teaching activities are powerful tools for feminist pedagogy because they aid in a restructuring of the teacher-student hierarchy, respatialize the classroom, foster a sense of community, and require the active participation of all students.⁷

Feminist pedagogy is committed to “changing the traditional roles of students and teachers” in order to “allow for new [kinds of] activity” (Sandell, 1991, p. 182) in the classroom; it is avowedly “non-hierarchical” (Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009b, p. 5) or even “anti-hierarchical” (Fisher, 1981, p. 20) in disposition. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) recalls with sadness that “more than anything [her professors] seemed enthralled by the exercise of power and authority within their mini-kingdom, the classroom” (p. 17). Feminist instructors shy away from this manner of exercising authority. Crucially, feminist pedagogy does not simply require the instructor to abdicate the throne of her “mini-kingdom”; students must also take increased responsibility for the classroom proceedings. As Carolyn Shrewsbury (1997) observes, the feminist classroom is one in which “teacher-student and student-teacher, act as subjects, not objects” (p. 166). In a feminist classroom, then, the teacher’s willingness to learn from the students is counterbalanced by the students’ willingness to respect the teacher (and each other) as subjects. The traditional structure of authority in the feminist classroom, then, is simultaneously challenged from both above and below.

Feminist pedagogy, does not, however, require the instructor to become “just another student.” Bernice Fisher (1981) notes that, as early as the late 1970s, the field of women’s studies had already arrived at a point at which the “feminist teacher is faced with a certified body of knowledge on which she can be an expert” (p. 23). And, indeed, even as a lowly doctoral fellow, I still have six years of experience in a discipline about which my first-year students know little or nothing. The seduction of expertise, however, often leads instructors to make the false assumption that “students are not capable of acting responsibly, that if we don’t exert control over them, then there’s just going to be mayhem” (hooks, 1994, p. 152). Too often, instructors use their knowledge as an excuse to severely restrict students’ control over the classroom. I do not need to abandon my expertise in order to practice feminist pedagogy but I do need to expect more engagement and participation from my students. A feminist classroom is not a space in which the professor has surrendered all control; rather, it’s “a space where we’re all in power in different ways” (p. 152), acting together as subjects.

Game-based pedagogical activities rupture the traditional teacher-student relationship and, in so doing, change classroom power dynamics in a feminist way. Teaching with games requires that

students operate more autonomously in the classroom than they would during a traditional class session. As opposed to a lecture, which is “teacher/facilitator based,” a game-based teaching activity is “student/participant” based (Joplin, 1995, p. 20). Students run the classroom and I provide help when needed. By surrendering absolute control over my “mini-kingdom,” I allow my students the freedom to explore the arguments made by the procedural rhetoric of video games and to begin thinking critically about social systems. While they play, I can offer my expertise as a support to their learning process rather than authoritatively delivering my knowledge to them from on high.

Game-based teaching activities also reconfigure the teacher-student relationship in a feminist way by respatializing the classroom. As Ron Scapp notes, “The traditional notion of being in the classroom is a teacher behind a desk or standing at the front” (hooks, 1994, p. 137). This classroom configuration reinforces a traditional teacher-student hierarchy in which the teacher masterfully surveys the classroom while the students passively receive the lecture. Disrupting this classroom configuration is both a cause and a consequence of reconfigured power relationships; an instructor initially motivated by a desire to change the classroom dynamic will soon discover that the physical rearrangement of bodies and space will have much deeper effects than originally imagined. For example, bell hooks (1994) recalls how the experience of rearranging her classroom transformed her own approach to her students:

I remember in my early teaching days that when I first tried to move beyond the desk, I felt really nervous. I remember thinking, ‘This really is about power. I really do feel more “in control”; when I’m behind the podium or behind the desk than when I’m walking towards my students, standing close to them...’ Acknowledging that we are bodies in the classroom has been important for me, especially in my efforts to disrupt the notion of professor as omnipotent, all-knowing mind. (p. 138)

In my own classroom, I (admittedly) stand behind a podium during most lectures in order to feel control over the room; this decision encourages my students to perceive me as an authoritative figure. During game-based teaching activities, however, both the physical configuration of the classroom and the distribution of classroom authority undergo a fundamental shift. My first game-based teaching activity took place in an Emory Center for Interactive Teaching classroom that had twenty computers; some students used laptops around an island in the middle of the room while most students used the desktop computers lining the walls. During a traditional lecture, I stand in front of my students, presenting the material. With games in the classroom, however, I stand behind them, supporting them as they work through the material themselves. During a traditional lecture, I occupy a subject position and speak to my students as objects; with games in the classroom, I feel more like a subject among nineteen other subjects as we play together (cf. Shrewsbury, 1997, p. 166). I am no longer “just relating information or stating things” as I would in a lecture but “working with *people*” instead (hooks, 1994, p. 135, italics added).

This mutual recognition of each other as subjects is a direct consequence of the way in which game-based teaching activities physically de-center the instructor. When hooks rearranged her

own classroom, she felt that it “forced us to recognize one another’s presence” (p. 146). During my game-based teaching activities, I was able to circulate the room and spend one-on-one time supporting each individual student (cf. Joplin, 1995, p. 18). I witnessed Michael’s determination to reach the end of the maze in *Lim* and saw Ben’s frustration with playing *Halo* set to LASO. I watched Sarah’s eyebrows raise as she inadvertently discovered Merritt Kopas’ other, erotic games and I felt Laura’s heart break when she was harassed in *Mainichi*. When I give a lecture, my students are too often simple objects, blurry bodies gathered on the far side of my podium; when teaching with games, my students’ individual needs and learning styles become more apparent.

Playing video games in class also fostered a sense of community, a desired outcome in feminist pedagogy (see Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009b, p. 5). Shrewsbury (1997) notes that feminist pedagogy is “based on a reconceptualization of community with a richness that includes the autonomy and individuality of members who share a sense of relationship and connectedness with each other” (p. 171). Game-based teaching activities can foster precisely this type of community: each student is able to have their own, individual experiences with the game but they are still able to relate to each other as they play. In my experience, my students spent more time interacting with each other during game-based teaching activities than they did during regularly scheduled small group discussions when I explicitly instructed them to talk to one another. As they played games side by side, students shared strategies for (and interpretations of) *Lim*. As they learned about the process of gender transition through *dys4ia*, they laughed together at Anthropy’s humor and shared their disbelief at the difficulties she faced. Video games unified my classroom community in ways that I could not have predicted in advance.

Feminist pedagogy strives to engage each member of this classroom community; it “demands the active participation of all students” (Sandell, 1991, 182). Video games likewise require full attention and active participation. Traditional pedagogy takes “a rote, assembly-line approach to learning” (hooks, 1994, p.13) in which students sleepwalk through the syllabus, listening to prefabricated lectures. In its place, feminist pedagogy promotes “participatory classroom structures and dynamics” that require the students to take action in order to learn (Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009b, p. 5). By definition, video games require interaction and, as such, they seem to engage students almost effortlessly. Consider that, when Anna Anthropy released *dys4ia*, “one of the first comments” she received was: “If this was a blog post, I wouldn’t have read it. If this was a video I wouldn’t have watched the whole thing. But because this was a game, I played it until the end” (McBee, 2012). Similarly, when I assign my students to read a personal account of transition written by a transgender woman, only a fraction of them will read it thoroughly, no matter how I test their knowledge. But when my students play *dys4ia* in class, the interactivity of the game requires them to actively move through the material themselves. My shy, shell-shocked first-year students were remarkably quiet throughout the entire semester but, when we played games in class, they came alive with curiosity and excitement. Video games, then, are an ideal way to transform a classroom into an active, engaged, participatory community of learners.

Addressing Concerns

Before bringing video games into my classroom, I was concerned about the effects they might have on my classroom dynamics. Would the students have too much fun? Would they take me

less seriously as an instructor? My questions, I now realize, implicitly subscribe to the traditional pedagogical view that enjoyment is antithetical to learning. As educator Ron Scapp wryly observes in his conversation with feminist theorist bell hooks, "To prove your academic seriousness, students should be almost dead, quiet, asleep, not up, excited, and buzzing, lingering around the classroom" (hooks, 1994, p. 145). In my paranoia, I was worried that the tenured professors would sneer at the new girl with the rowdy students. Other feminist instructors might likewise have concerns about implementing game-based teaching activities in their own classrooms. In this concluding section, I attempt to alleviate some of these concerns.

Feminist instructors might be concerned that game-based activities will be perceived as pandering or, worse, as futile attempts to be "cool." But bell hooks (1994) bemoans the fact that "our fear of losing students' respect has discouraged many professors from trying new teaching practices" (p. 145). Scapp agrees, noting that instructors often exhibit "a fear of letting go in the classroom, of taking risks" (p. 152). Teaching with games in the feminist classroom requires the instructor to swallow this fear and trust that game-based teaching activities will produce invigorating class sessions. As hooks (1994) argues, "education should be a place where the need for diverse teaching methods and styles would be valued, encouraged, seen as essential to learning" (p. 203). Feminist classrooms should be spaces in which students "learn to understand phenomena through multiple lenses" (Crabtree, Sapp, & Licona, 2009b, p. 6). Video games are becoming an increasingly salient lens through which our students perceive the world; a full fifty-eight percent of Canadians, for example, play video games (ESAC, 2013). Given the increasing cultural significance of video games, game-based pedagogy should be one method among many in an engaged, feminist classroom. Feminist pedagogy is at its best when it experiments with new teaching methods despite the perceived risks.

Furthermore, because video games come packaged with certain social connotations, feminist instructors might be concerned that students will feel as if they do not have to be intellectually engaged during a game-based teaching activity. As Ian Bogost (2008) observes: "we tend not to consider video games as legitimate venues for learning to take place is precisely because they are games, *playthings*" (p. 120, italics in original). My students, too, implicitly endorse this mindset. When I announce a game-based teaching activity, they ask me incredulously, "We're going to play video games?" as if they were getting away with a crime. This incredulity is always a frustrating pedagogical moment. Because we are breaking from a traditional lecture format, students are tempted to treat the activity less seriously than it is intended. As bell hooks (1994) relates: "I am discouraged when I encounter students who believe if there's a different practice they can be less committed, less disciplined." (p. 145). To address this concern, I tell my students, as Scapp does, "not to confuse informality with a lack of seriousness, to respect the process" (p. 146). Or, as Bogost (2008) puts it: "the sort of play that we perform is not always the stuff of leisure" (p. 136). In order to reinforce the counter-intuitive idea that play is not necessarily a trifle, I require my students to be fully engaged during the class activity and to write in detail about their experiences thereafter. I also make sure to teach games "alongside traditional media" (p. 136); games may make certain arguments through their procedural rhetoric but traditional reading can provide the context for those arguments.

Other feminist instructors, like me, might be concerned about the heightened affective register of game-based teaching activities. Are video games too "fun" to be paired with serious material

about, say, intersectional oppression? Will the “mayhem” (hooks 1995, p. 152) of dozens of students playing games simultaneously be counterproductive to meaningful learning? hooks (1994) points out the contradiction inherent in assuming that pleasure and enjoyment inhibit learning: “It is as though we are to imagine that knowledge is this rich creamy pudding students should consume and be nourished by, but not that the process of gestation should also be pleasurable” (p. 145). But as these game-based teaching activities can demonstrate, enjoyment and meaningful learning are not mutually exclusive, even when approaching difficult subjects.

My experience teaching *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi* also proves that playing video games can be a productively unpleasurable experience, as my students were able to trace the contours of transphobia through their own frustration with the games. Furthermore, Scapp notes that an engaged classroom ought to be an affectively complex one: “learning can be painful” but it also “doesn’t preclude the possibility of joy.” He adds: “Not all pain is harm, and not all pleasure is good” (p. 154). To feminist instructors who are concerned that video games will turn their classrooms into unruly playgrounds, I would observe that video games are affectively complex objects which solicit intense and variable emotional responses. Embracing this liveliness is key to practicing feminist pedagogy.

Feminist pedagogical practices also requires students to overcome their own fears of departing from a traditional pedagogical model. As Scapp observes:

[students] are already convinced that they cannot respond to appeals that they be engaged in the classroom, because they’ve already been trained to view themselves as not the ones in authority, not the ones with legitimacy. To acknowledge student responsibility for the learning process is to place it where it’s least legitimate in their own eyes. When we try to change the classroom so that there is a sense of mutual responsibility for learning, students get scared that you are now not the captain working with them, but that you are after all just another crew member.

(hooks, 1994, p. 144)

In my experience shifting from traditional lectures to game-based teaching activities, my students had difficulty adjusting to their increased responsibility for the operation of the class. For example, when I took them to the Emory Center for Interactive Teaching to play *dys4ia*, *Lim* and *Mainichi*, I simply provided links to all three games and told them to explore at their leisure. Nervous students turned to me, looking for their captain, saying, “What do you want us to do? Which one do you want to play first?” To these questions I said, “You get to choose how you spend the class today.” Implementing game-based feminist pedagogical activities, then, requires both the instructor and the students to overcome their discomfort with deviations from a traditional pedagogical mode. As bell hooks aptly puts it, “we have to challenge and change the way *everyone* thinks about pedagogical processes” (p. 144, italics added).

Video games are poised to make powerful contributions to Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and to the practice of feminist pedagogy. As interactive systems, they can help students understand systemic features of the social world through a feminist lens. Games by marginalized creators can help students understand experiences that differ from their own. Video games also

restructure classroom dynamics in feminist ways by requiring active student engagement and challenging hierarchies of professorial authority. While feminist instructors might have justifiable concerns about implementing game-based teaching activities in their own classrooms, the benefits outweigh the risks.

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1 My nineteen students consisted of five freshmen, seven sophomores, four juniors, and three seniors. Of these, seven identify as male, eleven as female, and one as 'agender' (a term used to describe a total disidentification with the gender binary). The students also came from a variety of class, ethnic, and racial backgrounds.

2 Laura Joplin (1995) argues that debriefing is an important final step in any form of experiential education. My students' blog posts fulfilled the role of this debriefing, allowing my students to "sort," "order," and "learn from" their experiences (p. 19). In accordance with Joplin's recommendation that debriefing be a public process, I required my students to read excerpts from each other's blog posts in the days following our in-class activity.

3 All students gave me written permission to quote their blog posts from the course website in all future writing on our game-based class activities. In this article, I use pseudonyms for each of my students in order to protect their anonymity.

4 With more time and resources, I would like to expand this activity to include a finer gradation of setups between these two extreme poles of difficulty. In the future, I hope to include three or four setups with different configurations of skulls / difficulty settings.

5 See the psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi's (1996) theory of "flow" which has been taken up in games discourse to suggest that, ideally, game designers should keep the player in a state of "flow" by ensuring that the challenge of the game is neither too uninteresting or too frustrating (Chen, 2006). My *Halo* exercise intentionally thwarts the player's ability to experience "flow" in order to teach my students about intersectional oppression. It is no surprise, then, that their reactions were alternately ones of boredom and frustration.

6 Bogost's classic text on procedural rhetoric is his 2008 *Persuasive Games*. However, as his 2007 chapter in *The Ecology of Games* addresses education and the context of the classroom more explicitly, it functions as my primary reference in this article.

7 The literature on feminist pedagogy is extensive but relatively concentrated. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the institutionalization of Women's Studies, Paulo Freire's (1970) "critical pedagogy" influenced feminist notions of "liberatory pedagogy." The bulk of the literature begins to taper off in the late 1980s and mid 1990s as postmodern feminist theory begins to question the values of liberation and empowerment (see, e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; for a broad overview see Crabtree, Sapp & Licona, 2009a). In citing this literature, I have circumvented the debate over "empowerment" to focus on principles of feminist pedagogy with more enduring relevance such as active student engagement and an anti-hierarchical restructuring of power in the classroom.